

---

# Universal Grammar

by Mary Soon Lee

---

---

Fictionwise Contemporary - Science Fiction

---



Fictionwise Publications  
[www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com)

Copyright (C)1997 Mary Soon Lee

First published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, April 1997

---

---

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines.

If you did not obtain this ebook directly from Fictionwise or an authorized Fictionwise affiliate then you are in violation of copyright law and are denying the author of this work their fair royalty. Please visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to purchase a legitimate copy.

Fictionwise offers a reward of up to \$500 for information leading to the conviction of any person violating the copyright of a Fictionwise ebook.

---

---

AS SOON as I saw the pictures of the latest aliens sliming inside their tank, I knew two things. One: I didn't want to go anywhere near those creatures. Two: the department would make me do so.

I turned my back on the pub's news-cube and swallowed the rest of my vodka in a burning gulp. The aliens reminded me of the octopus I'd run into one day at the seaside. At six years old, I'd taken a good look at the octopus with its corpse-white suckers opening and closing like a hundred blind mouths, and then I had run screaming up to the hotel.

Well, that was a long time ago. I'm thirty-three now and I have an image to maintain: Janna Suzorsky,

woman of the world, undaunted by anything or anyone that comes my way, aliens included. But the hair was standing up on the back of my arms, and I had to struggle to maintain a calm expression.

The first alien visitors arrived in 2039. I was finishing my doctorate, certain that the aliens would have more sense than my own people, desperate to meet them. But the aliens didn't come to the USA, let alone Harvard. Instead they announced in flawless Parisian French that they wanted to take photographs of the Eiffel Tower. A day later, they were gone and we hadn't learned one word of their language.

Since then, Earth has had interstellar visitors an average of once every two years; the octopus creatures were our eighth alien species. The others arrived speaking perfect Spanish, or Swahili, or Texas drawl. The closest anyone got to learning their own languages was when I deduced some simple word elements from the gestural vocabulary of the Eridanians. As soon as the Eridanians realized I'd understood some of their remarks, they stopped gesturing and talked to one another in Mandarin Chinese. When it came right down to it, none of the aliens had given us any more than a field day for the media and a huge boost to military budgets. Not one new antibiotic, or metal alloy, or even a glimpse of the interior of their spaceships.

In the background I heard the newscaster getting more and more excited. So far the octopus aliens hadn't said a word in any human language. A UN official expressed cautious optimism that these aliens didn't understand us. Maybe they'd be willing to teach us their language as we taught them ours. Maybe.

My curiosity was beginning to conquer my dislike for all things slimy and tentacled. Catching Billy the bartender's eye, I held up two fingers for another double-shot of vodka. If the truth be known, I've never much liked the flavor of alcohol, but my DNA chart shows no predisposition to alcoholism and liquor has its uses. By the time I was halfway through my second vodka, I was calm enough to swivel back toward the news-cube.

The seven aliens had docked at the Principia geosynchronous orbital station at 06:15 that morning. They'd sent an unintelligible message on the UN military channel three weeks earlier, and the Security Council had been tracking their ship ever since. Not that the Council had deigned to tell the rest of us until the last possible moment. So there the aliens were, tentacles gesticulating wildly behind the smoky blue walls of their tank.

Trying to communicate.

At least, that's what everyone hoped, myself included. I sat there at the bar, outwardly composed, but my heartbeat sang loud in my ears. I made myself watch the motions of the aliens, every ripple of their tentacles, the pattern in which their suckers opened and closed. Once the newscast switched away from the creatures to show Holman, my boss. Holman smiled his boyish grin, complete with a goddamn perfect dimple, as he murmured techno-speak for the cameras: language semantics, binding theory, the difficulties of inferring non-phonetic trace elements.

From the way the veins stood out on the backs of his hands, I could tell that Holman was stalling. He had no more idea what the aliens were saying than the cameramen did. But caught between the media-glare, the pressure from the military types, and his own ego, he hadn't yet admitted to himself that he was stumped.

I estimated it would take him two more hours to realize that. And another hour to persuade himself to call me. I almost felt sorry for him. After all, it must be humiliating to ask assistance from a junior member of the department. Especially when she's publicly refused three dates and instead spends her time in some run-down pub in the East End of London.

I ran my finger along the counter, leaving a smeary track through the ringed imprints of glasses. This must once have been an exclusive establishment. The walls were wainscoted in English oak, the windows fitted with antique stained glass. But now the carpet was threadbare, the smell of cigarettes soaked decades-deep into the yellowed walls. There were only four customers, myself, and three seedy characters playing poker at a corner table.

Billy the bartender muted the newscast and leaned on the counter opposite me. "Wasn't that your boss on the news?"

I nodded, scowling a little. Billy never quizzes me about my job and *The Aliens*, which is one of the reasons I keep coming to his pub. Unfortunately he doesn't show the same restraint on the subject of Holman.

"I hear he's been given another honorary degree," said Billy.

I nodded again. Billy stared at me expectantly, but I wasn't going to help him with this particular conversation. Holman had milked every last drop of academic credit from our joint study of the Eridanian gestural vocabulary. To be fair, he'd wanted to list me as senior author, but I declined. The bulk of the analysis was his. After the Eridanians switched to speaking Chinese my enthusiasm dwindled; I continued to analyse the earlier tapes, trying to interpret more of their gestures, but it reminded me of studying Latin, or Sumerian, or any other dead language that no one but academics will ever speak.

I gazed at the muted news-cube. Two of the octopus creatures brushed tentacles with each other, a slow, languid touch. I waited for the camera to pull back and show the others: how did they react? Was touching commonplace or significant? But the camera cut to the vacuous smirk of a journalist and then to the adverts.

Dammit, how long was Holman going to take before he called me? The man had a knack for being perfectly infuriating without doing anything I could actually object to. The day before, at the end of a department meeting, he had asked us all to join him for some relaxation. His dimpled smile had been Innocence itself. But I knew that he knew the others were busy, and I wasn't about to agree to an evening alone for two.

I had declined his offer with chilly politeness, and only then had Holman played his trump card. "A pity," he said, his rich deep voice drawing out each syllable, "I had tickets for the opening performance of *Pride and Prejudice*."

I'd been trying to get tickets for the premiere for weeks. If it had been anyone else I'd have asked to accept the invitation after all. But I could see from Holman's smirk that he was waiting for me to do exactly that.

As I sat in the pub I was part way to believing that he'd planned this too: picked a weekend when I'd made it clear I was otherwise engaged, and then arranged for the most intriguing alien contact to date. All right, so that was going too far, but why hadn't the man phoned me by now?

I badly needed a distraction. I stood up and crossed over to the poker game.

Big Al grinned at me. "You look like you got some cash burning holes in your pockets?"

"Maybe." I took a seat on Lara's right, laid a fold of bills down on the worn green felt.

Lara riffle-shuffled the cards, and pushed them to me to cut, the light reflecting from her long red fingernails. Beside Lara, I feel like a flat-chested teenager. At nights, when the pub fills up, she plays the role of a licensed hooker who's relaxing on her night off. I don't know what her real job is, but I'd guess something much drier, an accountant or an insurance underwriter.

I pushed the deck back to Lara. "What's the game?"

Flicking her blonde ponytail over her shoulder, Lara dealt the cards out, keeping them low to the table. "Five card stud, nothing wild."

We played stud poker and draw poker, brag and blackjack. The pile of money in front of me swelled and dwindled and grew again. After four hours, I was ahead by a few dollars and Big Al was up considerably more. Lara looked resigned and Marcos looked gloomy.

And Holman hadn't called.

When I couldn't keep my mind on the game, I stood up and gave my place to a man I didn't recognize. I didn't want to go back to my apartment, and I was in no mood for hitting the town. So I went upstairs to the login booths. My usual booth was free. I slipped in my credit chip and shut the door behind me.

Billy hasn't paid for the fancy VR upgrades, but his booths are soundproof and the datalinks are secure. I linked in to the department's system and called up the files on the octopus aliens. They leapt into view on the cube: seven sets of tentacles waving in front of me with crystal clarity. I shifted further back in my chair.

My security clearance gave me access to most of the files. Twenty-three minutes after the alien ship had docked at Principia, their airlock cycled open and the aliens came out in their tank. The airlock had cycled open once every 2.8 hours since then. Each time it stayed open exactly 29.3 seconds, but nothing had come out except that first tank. The tank itself was a sealed prism about four meters long by two meters tall; ignoring the nominal floor and ceiling marked out in Principia's microgravity environment, the tank glided along the walls before settling in a doorway.

The military were sticking to their usual hands-off policy; no invasive scans of the aliens, nor of their ship, nor of their equipment. The policy might or might not explain why none of the alien species had yet attacked us, but it left us with very few hard facts.

The physicists couldn't determine whether the ship possessed a faster than light drive, nor what weaponry it had, if any. The biologists had detailed the apparent similarities and differences between the aliens and Earth marine creatures, but most of their report was speculation. The aliens floated behind those smoky blue walls, apparently silent, though the biologists wouldn't rule out the possibility of a vocal component stopped by the tank's wall.

Twice in the last five hours the tank had spontaneously glided along the walls of Principia to a new resting place. The engineers hadn't figured out how the aliens controlled those movements; there were no obvious links from the tank's interior to any steering system. Maybe the tank responded to the creatures' movements.

I flicked past the reports and replayed the videos of the aliens themselves. It didn't take long before I had a full scale headache. There were so many separate motions to consider. They might be communicating by the position of their tentacles, or the changing rhythms in which their maggot-grey suckers opened and

closed, or by the undulating shape of one particular sucker, or by scent-coded messages sprayed into the water.

I programmed the computer to try to find correlations between the creatures' behavior and the stimuli being provided by Holman and the others. Holman showed the aliens elementary mathematical sequences, diagrams of the periodic table, star charts, geometrical shapes, pictures of Earth fauna and flora.

Occasionally the aliens appeared to be watching him, but I couldn't pick out any clear response. Surely they must have at least understood numerical sequences such as prime numbers: why didn't they reply? Because we insulted them by choosing something so basic? Because Holman himself had somehow offended them? Or maybe they had signaled an answer, and we were too obtuse to decipher it.

A priori, we have no reason to assume that an alien language will be intelligible to us. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Chomsky and other linguists began to deduce the human language faculty. Contrary to earlier assumptions, human infants don't learn language from first principles. Instead part of their brain is already geared up to decrypt human-style language. On a deep structural level, Chinese and Bengali and Latin all follow the same underlying rules for handling nouns and verbs, for using trace elements and binding anaphora. This complex system is available to us subconsciously from our innate language faculty. Infants must learn the particular vocabulary and local rules from their environment, but the deeper rules of how to process language are already in place.

An alien language, however, would be expected to have a different structure, one which our brains aren't adapted to process. So, unlike a human language, we would never be able to master the alien tongue to the point where our understanding of it happened immediately and subconsciously. Nonetheless, with the aid of computers and logical inference—and some cooperative aliens—we might be able to deduce the rules of the language. And then we could consciously interpret it in the same mechanical way that we can decode a mathematically encrypted message.

The previous sets of aliens, the ones who spoke our languages perfectly, had presumably first studied our TV and radio broadcasts. Having deduced the rules of our languages, they could have coded them onto some kind of translator implant to use when speaking to us.

That was the theory anyhow. Yet as I sat in the booth, trying to spot meaningful patterns and symmetries in the aliens' behavior, I didn't make any progress at all. I wasn't even sure which movements were genuine language signals and which were random noise.

When it got to nine in the evening, I went down to the bar and grabbed a chicken sandwich and three aspirin. Billy nodded at the news-cube as the camera zoomed in on Holman's face. Holman's grin looked a little more strained, and there were faint shadows under his eyes, but the bastard still hadn't phoned me.

'According to Reuters,' said Billy, 'your boss's been studying the aliens for fourteen hours straight. I respect that. Most people are too busy enjoying themselves to hold a regular job, let alone to really work at it.'

Sometimes Billy sounds like a pensioner harping on the good old days, though he can't be more than forty-five. 'Holman enjoys his work,' I mumbled, my mouth half-full of sandwich. 'And he especially enjoys all the attention that comes from it.'

'Maybe, maybe not, but once he figures out what those octopus things are saying, he'll have more

attention than he knows what to do with.?

?If he figures out what they're saying.?

Billy smiled. ?I bet he's halfway there already.?

I would have made a skeptical remark, but Billy had moved on to another customer. I chewed the rest of my sandwich automatically, my appetite gone. Waiting for Holman to finally ask me for help was bad enough. Thinking that he might solve this without me brought back my headache.

I stalked upstairs to the booth, and placed a call to Holman. It took six full minutes before he deigned to wander over to a privacy hood and speak to me. When his face finally appeared in the cube, I realized I hadn't planned what to say. Deciding on the casual approach, I said, ?How's it going??

?Janna, I'm busy. Is there something you need??

?Not at all. I thought you might want some assistance; I could catch the next clipper up to Principia??

Holman shook his head. ?This area of the station's been secured. I've been asked to keep my staff down to a minimum. Besides, you made it obvious enough that you were busy this weekend. So, if there's nothing wrong at your end?? His deep voice rose slightly in question. Holman has the most expressive voice I know. If it weren't for the way we end up yelling at each other, I could listen to him for hours.

?No, nothing's wrong??

?Good.?

He closed the connection.

I glared at the CALL TERMINATED sign flashing in the center of the cube. There were probably two dozen scientists, a squad of UN soldiers, three camera crews, and twenty politicians all up there with the aliens. Yet Holman had all but ordered me to stay away.

Well, fine then. I called up the files on the aliens again. Painstakingly, I repeated my analysis, this time searching with the computer for paired movements that might combine to form a single word element.

Somehow I was approaching this incorrectly. That had been the problem with the Eridanians. We'd been so busy speculating about the high-pitched clicks they periodically made that we ignored their gestures. Now the biologists conjectured that the clicks had been a mere animal process, say like our stomachs rumbling when we're hungry.

I glanced at the clock: 11:15 P.M. Two more hours had disappeared. My animal body was getting tired. A purple cue-button popped up at the top of the cube?the aliens? airlock had cycled open again, right on time, but nothing came out. I rubbed at my temples: okay, the airlock opened every 2.8 hours. Why? If not to let something out, then maybe they were waiting for us to put something there. Such as what? Human visitors in exchange for the aliens touring Principia? Only the aliens didn't seem that interested in Principia. The tank moved, but the aliens barely paid attention to their surroundings.

*That was it.* I leaned forward, my fingers trembling, and quickly ran a search through the few stimuli the aliens seemed to pay attention to: bright colors, rapid movements of large objects.

I called up Holman.

He answered almost at once, his face snapping into view in the middle of the cube. Stubble dotted the clean lines of his chin.

?Janna.? Tiredness seeped into his voice, deepening it further. ?I'm sorry; I intended to call you back. Have you had time to examine the recordings??

?Yes?and you're trying to talk to the wrong aliens. The octopuses are just animals?maybe presented to us as some kind of test, or ritual exchange, or??

?Perhaps you'd better begin at the beginning.?

I took a deep breath. ?Okay. It only occurred to me a few minutes ago, but I'm pretty certain that the octopuses aren't intelligent. Try running a series of stimulus response tests on them, and I'll give you three to one odds they'll only react to simple visual cues. They haven't responded to complex signals such as prime numbers, because they don't understand them any more than a chimpanzee does.?

?One second.? Frowning, Holman turned away from the phone pickup. I heard the faint echo of his voice speaking to someone out of my sight. He disappeared for a minute, and then his face swung back in place. He gave me his best dimpled grin. ?It appears you could be right, Dr. Suzorsky. Any other conjectures you wish to share??

?Not really, only that if there are any sentient aliens still inside the ship, they might be sitting there waiting for us to give them something in exchange for the octopuses.?

?Which is why their airlock cycles open periodically? Possibly.? Holman turned away again and swung back a moment later. ?Can you be at the Cape in three hours? There's a military shuttle taking off for Principia.?

?I'll be there.?

\* \* \* \*

Holman met me when I stepped out of the shuttle and onto Principia geosynchronous orbital station. I'd been to the Lunar colonies several times and once to a low Earth orbit station, but I'd never before boosted on a military shuttle. My legs were jelly. If I hadn't already lost my dinner on the short flight, I'd have lost it over Holman.

?Rough trip?? said Holman, grinning.

I wanted to kick him, but I was still adjusting to being in a microgravity environment. By the time my foot was aimed to kick, Holman was part way down the corridor.

?Hurry up. You were right about the octopuses being non-sentient.?

Cautiously, I pushed my magnetic boots away from the broad metal ribbon of the beginners? pathway, and propelled myself along after Holman.

He waited impatiently for me to catch up. ?We're not sure yet whether the octopuses were meant as a gift, or a test, or a trade. We put a tank of fish into the airlock last time it cycled open, together with a

sheet of mathematical sequences and a map of the solar system.?

?Any response??

?Not yet. But if they keep to their previous schedule, the airlock will open again in nine minutes.?

Holman hurried us past the military checkpoints, slowing only as we approached the secondary docking area. The curved windows showed a mass of jewel-bright stars, their blue and red and yellow shades a thousand times clearer than on Earth. Against this backdrop hung the cylindrical structure of the alien ship, bathed in the station's floodlights. Odd protrusions prickled from every surface of the main cylinder?thin metallic rods, cobwebs of rust-colored strands, rounded bumps. From one end a short tube flexed across to the station's docking port. It was the ugliest, strangest, most fascinating object I'd ever seen.

Holman caught me by the arm and stopped me by a line on the floor. A group of other people clustered behind the line. Off to one side stood five soldiers, their spines ramrod straight. At least their guns were holstered.

With a faint sigh, the airlock door opened. Two tall figures stepped forward, their bodies hidden in pale orange spacesuits. But I could make out their heads through the smoky blue of their face plates. Three insectile compound eyes stared back at us from each face, the eyes spaced evenly around a mobile white orifice?mouth, or nose, or something else.

A lump bulged from the side of one of the spacesuits, and the alien held out a sheet covered in jagged symbols. A tinny sound resonated in the air, like rain dancing on a metal roof.

Holman's hand pushed me forward, and then I was standing a meter in front of the alien, tilting my head to stare at its face.

?Hello.? I took the sheet of symbols from the alien, the texture rougher than paper between my fingers. The alien's eyes glinted at me. For a moment my throat was too full to speak. ?Thank you, thank you very much. We're very happy to welcome you to Earth.?

The alien said something in that patter of tinny sounds. It subsided downwards, the suit belling outward, and crouched on the magnetic strip in the floor. The other alien crouched down beside it.

Alien number two laid down a metal tray, and pushed a round blue disk into the center of the tray. ?Tt-si,? it said. It added a second disk. ?Tt-siyt.?

I squatted down on the floor and pointed first at one disk then the other, my fingers shaking. ?One. Two.?

?You realize,? said Holman dryly as he settled down beside me, ?that they might be saying `round,? `blue,? `metal,? or just `hello.? If those are even words at all.?

?Pessimist,? I muttered.

Alien number one's spacesuit bulged, and it deposited a third blue disk. ?Tt-miyt. . . . Tt-si, tt-siyt, tt-miyt.?

?Three,? said Holman. ?One, two, three.?



The muscles round my mouth felt strange. It was only when I glanced over to Holman and saw his broad grin that I realized I was beaming like a baby.

\* \* \* \*

That first day we covered some rudimentary vocabulary, numbers, mathematical terms, the names of chemical elements. And each other's names. The aliens were, to my ear, ?Tmisi,? and ?Sirit.? There's a lot of extra detail carried at frequencies just above the human auditory range. Tmisi was the more talkative of the pair and fidgeted more.

On the second day, we progressed to simple sentences?"A Tsiliit has three eyes; a human has two eyes"?"enough to realize that the underlying structure of the language the aliens were teaching us was very similar to our own.

On day three, several terrestrial academics announced that they had suspected such language similarities for years. Just as there is a single theory that captures the essential properties of arithmetic, the academics claimed that the human language faculty captures the most economical way to structure complex thoughts, from the hierarchical use of nested clauses to the splitting of words into noun-verb categories.

The next day, having cleared it with the military, Holman brought out tapes of our earlier alien visitors. Sirit took one look as we played the first tape, then folded its head down against its body, eyes hidden.

?What did I do? Did I upset you?? Holman switched off the tape, but Sirit stayed tucked over against itself and didn't answer.

Tmisi shrilled the Tsiliit for ?I don't understand? followed by a rapid patter of words I didn't recognize.

I stared at Sirit and all I could think was that we'd hurt it somehow. And suddenly the Tsiliit I'd learned seemed useless, touching on nothing that I needed. I knew how to say ?The Earth is the third planet orbiting our sun? but I couldn't say ?I'm sorry.?

I stretched out my hand and brushed the side of its spacesuit, the way I'd seen Sirit and Tmisi brush each other. ?I'm sorry,? I said in English, and then asked in Tsiliit, ?Did seeing the tapes of the aliens cause body-injury to Sirit??

?No.? Sirit raised its head fractionally. ?The tapes made me lisiyr"?"a word I didn't understand?"those aliens did not talk to us, did not give anything.?

Sirit straightened up. In its tinny accent, it said, ?It causes me much tsiys to talk to you.?

?And we are very happy to talk to you.? My voice was husky. For some reason I didn't shrug Holman away when he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it gently.

Late on day six, I discovered that Tmisi and Sirit were both addicted to games. We showed them chess, and backgammon, and Parcheesi. In return, they taught me a game with an unpronounceable name, played with a bundle of short rods that change color when you touch them to each other. The rules of the game vary each time, the two opponents taking it in turns to invent fresh constraints.

The first time I beat Tmisi, it rocked back and forth, repeating, ?You won,? in English and Tsiliit. It nudged each short rod in turn until they changed to a glowing blue-green, then presented me with the

bundle of rods. ?A gift to you.?

?Thank you.? I gripped the rods tightly as if it would help me hold onto that moment.

One morning in the second week, Tmisi produced eight tiny machines for our scientists to study. One of our scientists offered a book of airplane schematics, and tried to question Tmisi about the alien machines. Tmisi wriggled, and said that it didn't understand what caused the machines to function. Wriggling a little more, it added, ?But I can show you how to use the animals we gave you.?

Holman looked up from his discussion with Sirit and stared at Tmisi. ?The octopuses have a particular function??

?Yes, yes,? said Tmisi. It followed us to the room where the biologists were studying the octopuses. Much to the biologists' excitement, three of the octopuses had laid foamy yellow clumps of eggs. Trying to look at anything except the octopuses, I gazed at one of the egg clumps as though it fascinated me.

Tmisi's spacesuit bulged and it took out a metallic rod. It pressed the tip against the wall of the tank. The rod glowed for a second, and then protruded into the tank's interior. Tmisi delicately positioned the rod over an egg clump. A transparent sheet extended from the end of the rod, fastened over the eggs, and then Tmisi pulled the assembly out. Tmisi held out the bundle of eggs to Holman.

Holman accepted it gingerly. ?How do I use these??

?Eat them.?

Holman nearly dropped the eggs. To his credit, he quickly wiped the look of disgust from his face. ?Thank you.?

Tmisi added, ?They will not cause you injury. Our computer analysed the human tissue samples that you gave us.?

Holman lifted up an egg between his fingers and placed it in his mouth with grim determination. ?Pretty good.? He turned to me with an evil smile. ?Would you like to try one??

Maybe I should have considered the diplomatic consequences of insulting a technologically superior species. Maybe I should have eaten the eggs out of common politeness. But it was the thought of Holman's mocking me if I refused that finally decided me. I grabbed an egg, popped it into my mouth and swallowed immediately.

?Delicious,? I lied, and headed to the restroom to be discreetly sick. The egg didn't taste bad, just mildly salty, but the knowledge that it came from one of those octopus creatures was too much for my stomach.

On the twenty-third evening of their visit, the aliens left. They kept trying to explain why they had to leave, but that was one of the conversations we never managed to interpret. Holman thinks it may have been something to do with mating rituals; I think Holman was just extrapolating from his own frustrations.

I stood near the docking port, my face pressed against the glass as the aliens prepared to leave. The tube to the airlock unclipped and coiled back up to the ship, and something coiled in my stomach, a hard lump.

'They'll be back,' said Holman, 'in six hundred and eleven Earth days.'

'I know.' I was hardly likely to have forgotten. Tmisi had told us so repeatedly. I tried to focus on that. Maybe they'd even come to Earth to visit Billy's pub, and I could teach them poker. There was no reason to feel sad, no reason at all. Three weeks ago, we lived in a universe where the only aliens we knew came and left without volunteering a single fact about themselves. Now I could speak an alien language, and I owned a strange game made of rods of changing colors. A gift from a friend.

The Tsiliit ship pulled away from the station. In one sharp motion it accelerated hugely, a dark blob racing across the field of stars. And then there was nothing.

'They'll be back,' repeated Holman, and this time it helped, at least a little, to hear his solid confidence. 'Are you taking the next clipper downside? There's a restaurant in Tokyo that plays the best jazz music, improbable though that is. We could eat dinner?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Fine.' He turned away.

'London,' I said. 'In the East End. There's a pub with peeling paintwork and a twenty-four hour poker game. Do you play?'

He grinned. 'Does a duck quack?'

\* \* \* \*

Big Al and Lara and I cleaned him out. What happened later that night is none of your business.

**The End**

---

At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can:

- Rate this story
- Find more stories by this author
- Read the author's notes for this story
- Get story recommendations